UNITED NATIONS

EP

Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme

Distr.
GENERAL

UNEP/GC.18/33
17 March 1995

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Eighteenth session
Nairobi, 15-26 May 1995
Item 4 (c) of the provisional agenda*

POLICY ISSUES: COORDINATION AND COOPERATION WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS

Report of the Administrative Committee on Coordination to the Governing Council of UNEP

International Cooperation in the Field of the Environment for 1995

Note by the Executive Director

1. The attached report of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) to the UNEP Governing Council has been prepared in response to the Council's decision 17/11 of May 1993 in which it took note of the invitation of the ACC for the Council to reexamine its decisions 14/2 and 14/4 and reassess the focus of future reporting. The Council emphasized that the ACC can play a significant role in assisting the Council to address system-wide cooperation and coordination for the environment, taking into account the development perspective, and requested the ACC in future to report only in those years when the Governing Council meets in regular sessions.

2. The Council further requested the ACC to focus future reports on policy matters, taking into account policy issues being addressed in other intergovernmental forums of relevance to the Council, and to address those policy issues that the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) identified for UNEP, in particular those regarding system-wide coordination as well as emerging and important environmental issues of system-wide interest.

3. Finally, the Council also requested the ACC to assist in harmonizing the Governing Council's decision-making process with that of other intergovernmental forums, inter alia, through regular reports of the ACC to the Council.

4. The topic selected for the present report concerns the provision of information for decision-making in the follow-up to UNCED and focuses on the UNEP-led system-wide Earthwatch and its environment data as they relate to the future arrangements for the generation and dissemination of development data and their integration into national and global assessments of sustainability.

* UNEP/GC.18/1.

270395

Na.95-0179 260395

/...

5. The following United Nations specialized agencies and organizations are involved in system-wide Earthwatch and several have contributed to the preparation of the report: United Nations Statistical Division, Department of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations Development Programme, Economic Commission for Europe, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Economic Commission for Africa, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Atomic Energy Agency, International Civil Aviation Organization, International Labour Organisation, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and its Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, World Bank, World Health Organization, World Meteorological Organization.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish:

(a) To consider the present report in conjunction with the report "Earthwatch, environment monitoring and assessment" (UNEP/GC.18/4) under item 5 of the provisional agenda;

(b) To consider the recommendations of the ACC in its deliberations on the question of system-wide Earthwatch;

(c) To express its appreciation to ACC, and request ACC to continue to report in those years that the Council meets in regular session.

Annex

ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ON COORDINATION REPORT TO UNEP GOVERNING COUNCIL 1995 ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The United Nations system-wide Earthwatch

Introduction

1. This report is submitted to the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) by the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 2997 (XXVII) of December 1972 on "Institutional and financial arrangements for international environmental cooperation" and 32/197 of December 1977 on the restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations system. The topic selected for this report is the UNEP-led system-wide Earthwatch.

2. One of the major achievements of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) process was the general acceptance that environment and development were closely interrelated and must be considered together. This idea is embodied in the concept of sustainable development. Since Rio, the challenge has been to give this concept practical application. One major area where the United Nations system can do this is in the implementation of chapter 40 of Agenda 21 on "Information for Decision-Making". The Secretary-General's Report to the Commission on Sustainable Development on the implementation of chapter 40 of Agenda 21 addresses the general problem of providing adequate information for decision-making on sustainable development. This report, however, focuses on the inter-agency dimension of the implementation of chapter 40.

3. With its high levels of population growth and resource consumption, the world is rapidly moving towards currently perceived planetary limits, for which the growing global environmental problems are warning signals. While there has been some progress, the overall trends are still negative. It is possible that as these problems grow, they could increasingly interact with negative feedback as global environmental stresses increase, if remedial action is not taken. The basic capacities of the planet to support human activity are being damaged. There is an evident trade-off between the level of material development and human well-being that will ultimately be sustainable on this planet, and the care that we take of economic assets, natural resources, environmental life-support systems and human capital. These in turn are influenced by our population size, technology, and levels of resource consumption and waste production. Information for decision-making in order to provide a basis for sustainable development requires the integration of all these environmental, economic and social dimensions at the global, regional and national levels.

Earthwatch

4. Earthwatch was first proposed at the Stockholm United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 as a United Nations system-wide mechanism coordinated by UNEP to monitor major global disturbance in the environment and to give early warning of problems requiring international action. Following UNCED, the organizations participating in Earthwatch have focused Earthwatch on the priority requirements of Agenda 21 and on the delivery of information for decision-making, as outlined in the report of the Secretary-General to the third session of the Commission on Sustainable Development on Agenda 21, chapter 40, and in the report of the Executive Director of UNEP to the UNEP Governing Council in response to General Assembly resolution 48/192 [of 21 December 1993] on "Strengthening International Cooperation in the monitoring of Global Environmental Problems" [UNEP/GC.18/4]. The first meeting of the inter-agency Earthwatch Working Party, held in Geneva from 1-2 June 1994, redefined the mission of the United Nations system-wide Earthwatch as being to coordinate, harmonize and integrate observing,

assessment and reporting activities across the United Nations system in order to provide environmental and appropriate socio-economic information for national and international decision-making on sustainable development and for early warning of emerging problems requiring international action. A number of specific activities designed to make the system-wide Earthwatch more operational were also identified.

5. The review of the system-wide contributions to Earthwatch has revealed the important role played by many agencies and organizations in different aspects of environmental observation, assessment and information for sustainable development. Over 30 significant inter-agency programmes were identified, together with a large number of related activities of United Nations system organizations. Even a partial costing suggests that the total financial effort represented by these activities is well over $50 million. Together they have great potential for meeting many of the requirements of the United Nations system-wide Earthwatch. However, many of these activities have been developed in response to specific agency mandates or sectoral problems. A considerable effort will be required to reinforce these activities so as to develop their full potential, to cross-link them and to strengthen collaboration where appropriate, and to integrate the results into a coherent Earthwatch process able to respond to the needs and expectations of the international community.

6. Through the efforts of the interagency Earthwatch Working Party and the work of UNEP as Inter-agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD) Task Manager for Earthwatch, the inputs of all the agencies and organizations of the United Nations system into Earthwatch have been identified, and mechanisms have been created to strengthen collaboration and joint programming. One major component of Earthwatch is the set of global observing systems with multi-agency sponsorship which are being developed for climate, oceans and terrestrial areas to make previously diffuse and scattered monitoring efforts more coherent, operational and focused on key issues of global change and sustainability.

7. United Nations system organizations participating in Earthwatch are counting on UNEP to carry out its coordinating function in this area and to provide the necessary leadership to a more integrated system-wide Earthwatch, through a combination of active participation and networking. In particular, if UNEP reinforces linkages among expert information fora on the one hand and decisions makers on the other (at national and regional level, and within international policy arenas such as the CSD) then a significant contribution shall have been made. The ACC stresses the importance it places on Earthwatch being a system-wide effort which requires the full participation and support of UNEP.

8. The need for and expectations of Earthwatch have evolved since its conception over twenty years ago. It is no longer sufficient just to alert the world to emerging and important environmental trends and problems. Environmental factors have to be integrated into political and economic decision-making mechanisms and become as fundamental as economics in determining sustainable development. This will require the development of a flow of environmental data, producing indicators for policy action to improve environmental protection and resource management, which in turn will involve adjustments in the economic development process. This flow of information must be more rapid, so that timely data and indicators are available when decision makers need them. Much of this must take place at the national level, but it is also relevant at the global level, where Earthwatch is the mechanism to provide this information.

9. Earthwatch should pay special attention to the need for balance among the requirements and capacities of various groups of countries in environmental observation, assessment and reporting activities, to ensure a reliable, accurate and objective flow of information at the international level. This

will require special emphasis on efforts to fill the gaps in the global coverage of these activities through capacity-building in information gathering and assessment that will allow the full participation of all countries in the observation and assessment processes.

10. The United Nations system-wide Earthwatch should not only work to deliver more integrated information for decision-making at the international level through cooperation among the sectoral agencies, but should also promote assistance to national Governments to achieve a similar integration of information at the national level, bridging the many departments and ministries that should be involved. The tools and methodologies now being developed in Earthwatch will be useful in this regard.

11. The principal users of Earthwatch will thus include not only the various intergovernmental decision-making bodies that have been created to adopt policy measures and management actions in the various fields of environment and development, but also decision makers in national Governments who are required to know the international context within which their national actions must take place in our increasingly interrelated world. Earthwatch should also continue to supply information to the general public to build support for the actions that are taken.

12. One problem increasingly being faced by all the agencies participating in Earthwatch which may require the policy attention of the Governing Council is that information for public purposes is increasingly becoming less accessible. One constraint is the increasing cost of information, as distinct from normal charges for connection or communications. Non-governmental organizations and even government departments are trying to find ways to cover the costs of their information services. Data and information sales are seen as one option to achieve this. In some countries, public services are being privatized. Since business users of data can usually pass the costs on to their customers, data charges are often set to what the private sector can afford to pay. Public services and United Nations agencies cannot afford excessive charges, and almost no policy maker has a budget for obtaining the information required for decision-making. Present market approaches, however, do not recognize that the usefulness and value of information are often increased through universal availability. There is also a problem of conflict of interest in access to information between the particular and the public good, such as with information held on damaging activities or dangerous properties in materials, whose release could threaten the reputation of the holder or the market for a product.

13. Governments are also sensitive to the release of information that may be perceived to be detrimental to legitimate national interests. This sensitivity can be accentuated by the fear of bias in the use of the information, for instance to favour particular economic systems, cultural models or styles of development, or to give an advantage to particular national or commercial interests. Yet in the common interest of the global community, objective environmental information is vital. As a matter of policy, the United Nations institutions must be the guarantor of the objectivity and reliability of information at the international level. Access by the United Nations system to the information required for an effective Earthwatch also needs to be promoted.

Addressing the interface between environment and development information

14. The changing role of Earthwatch was reflected in the deliberations of the Earthwatch Working Party, where the participating agencies did not consider it appropriate in the post-Rio period to consider the environment in isolation from human activities, since decision-making for sustainable development requires the integration of environmental, economic and social information. The Working Party therefore suggested as one option that a "Development Watch" should be created, with which Earthwatch could interact closely, as proposed in chapter 40 of Agenda 21.

15. Already, a number of efforts are being made to develop the methodologies for linking and integrating environment and development information at the regional and global levels to produce policy-relevant outputs, in cooperation among United Nations system organizations and with non-governmental organizations and the scientific community. For instance, UNEP, United Nations Statistical Division (UNSTAT) and the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development (DPCSD) are cooperating with the Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment (SCOPE) project on indicators of sustainable development. UNEP is exploring the usefulness of models, scenarios and projections through cooperation with the Dutch National Institute of Public Health and Environment (RIVM), the World Resources Institute, the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) and the Stockholm Environment Institute, and is involving a number of research centres in developing countries in these initiatives. The World Bank is also building its information system with reference to sustainable development. Particular attention is being paid to developing approaches suitable to all sizes of countries, all regions, cultures, economic systems and levels of development.

16. In response to chapter 40 of Agenda 21, a cooperative effort among the agencies has also begun to prepare proposals on Development Watch for the Commission on Sustainable Development. The United Nations, UNDP and UNEP, inter alia, will play a key role in this effort to develop methodologies and indicators for subsequent consideration by Governments and use by countries in assessing the sustainability of their own development at the national level. The challenge for a "development watch" will be to select the data and indicators that best measure the status and results of development in ways that are useful for policy and decision-making, going beyond the traditional economic indicators to cover more completely the issues raised in Agenda 21. A major focus of this effort will be to contribute to the development of a work programme for the Commission on Sustainable Development to produce a core set of indicators for sustainable development, to be developed by UNDPCSD/UNSTAT in close cooperation with UNEP. This will be a difficult task requiring reliable data, agreement on standard definitions and methodologies, and definition of a set of indicators for each of the major issues for which Agenda 21 set goals. Careful attention must be paid to balance, so that all countries can select the indicators that are appropriate to their own culture, resources and level of development. The resulting indicators will need to combine economic, social and environmental factors to produce indicators of sustainable development. Such indicators, combined with other information on sustainability, should help to stimulate and guide the national policy-making process. In recognition of this, there will be an emphasis on the need to include capacity-building as an integral part of the development of indicators, information and delivery systems.

17. Earthwatch will need to contribute to this process of defining and, where necessary, providing the environmental information needed to combine with economic and social data. It will also provide a global perspective to complement and reinforce the efforts of each nation to determine the sustainability of its own development, since some elements of sustainability inevitably extend beyond national borders.

18. Together, these efforts aim to achieve the kind of management system for sustainable development that we now use for economic development. The world needs national and global data, assessment and early-warning systems for environment and sustainability comparable to those presently governing the operation of economic decision-making. Linking Earthwatch with its focus on the global environment and a "development watch", through which countries can assess their own progress towards sustainability, will give a more complete picture of the trends in sustainable development. The two approaches (global and national) would produce joint outputs on the progress, possibilities and limits of sustainable development. The assembly within the framework of Earthwatch and "development watch" of data and assessments to produce indicators and projections using integrated conceptual frameworks, systems studies and models will assist the development of more future-oriented international policy in an increasingly complex and integrated world.

ACC Recommendations to the UNEP Governing Council

1. The ACC draws the attention of the Governing Council to the importance of Earthwatch as a United Nations system-wide activity and an essential component of information for decision-making as agreed in Agenda 21. It emphasizes the role of UNEP to provide leadership and direction to the United Nations system-wide Earthwatch, to support inter-agency coordination of observation, assessment and reporting activities, and to assist in the joint programming and integration of results that will make Earthwatch an effective effort of the United Nations system to provide international environmental information required for decision-making. It therefore recommends to the Governing Council and to all interested organizations of the United Nations system that sufficient resources be allocated to Earthwatch and to capacity-building for information gathering to implement this responsibility effectively.

2. The ACC considers that the Governing Council may wish to address ways of promoting ready access to the environmental information essential to ensure a coordinated and efficient approach to informed decision-making for sustainable development, including the implementation of a United Nations system-wide Earthwatch. The UNEP Secretariat might be requested to convene an ad hoc governmental expert group on the issue to further clarify the matter.

3. The ACC recommends that UNEP and the other organizations involved in the system-wide Earthwatch should continue to develop approaches to the linking of socio-economic and environmental assessment and reporting, and that the Earthwatch Working Party give further attention to the conceptual issues involved. In this connection, the ACC also recommends that UNEP and all concerned organizations of the United Nations system participate actively in the process underway to initiate a Development Watch and to ensure its close interlinkage with Earthwatch as parts of an integrated system of information for decision-making as recommended by Agenda 21.